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Cuban intelligence has finger in many pies — but record is mixed

Cuban intelligence agencies spy on the United States, police Cuban exiles, and give assistance to terrorist operations. But they have not been particularly successful in supporting revolution.

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

When four Cuban Embassy employees tried to kidnap a Cuban political refugee in Madrid last month, there could be little doubt that Cuban intelligence and security officials were behind the affair.

Bystanders foiled the kidnapping. Spain expelled the Cubans. Later Cuba requested extradition of the refugee charging that he had "committed serious financial irregularities," and tried to steal \$499,000 from a Madrid bank account.

Whether or not Cuba had a case against the defecting official is unclear but what is clear is that Cuban intelligence and security officials were prepared to use violent means to influence events.

Just how unsavory is Cuban intelligence?

Western propaganda services have labeled it as similar to third-world services, such as Libya, which regularly flaunt normal standards of international behavior. But the truth is more complex.

The structure of Cuban intelligence is complicated, and consists of six separate organizations. Three of these are most prominent:

- The Directorate General of Intelligence (DGI) under the Ministry of Interior, responsible for counterintelligence as well eliminating dissent.

- The Americas Department under the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee, which along with DGI supports revolutionary covert operations in the Western Hemisphere.

- The Department of State Security (DSE) under the Ministry of the Interior. DSE operates in areas where exiles militate against the Castro regime. Although difficult to ascertain, the DSE may be responsible for the Madrid operation cited above. One news agency cited "G-2" — DSE's predecessor group — as the responsible organization.

Western intelligence sources assert that Cuban operatives in larger Western capitals are particularly aggressive against their own exiles. But beyond this, Cuban intelligence gives extensive support to revolutionary organizations that use the tools of terrorism. Training for such insurgents has occurred regularly in Cuba. Some 300 Palestinian guerrillas were in Cuban camps as of 1979, and links with groups such as the African National Congress and South-West African People's Organization are well documented.

Most experts agree that, by the early 1970s, President Fidel Castro's zeal for revolutionary internationalism had diminished. He had retreated from a commitment to armed struggle, stopped attacks on Latin American Communist Parties, and acknowledged Moscow's leading role in the world communist movement.

But a review of Cuba's intelligence record is less clear on this point.

- In South America: In 1974, an umbrella organization called the Junta of Revolutionary Coordination (JCR), comprised of leftist groups from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay was formed. Its members received arms and training in techniques of clandestine warfare — mostly arranged by Cuban intelligence. In 1977, 13 of 14 Latin American terrorist groups then existing had an extreme leftist ideology. And the Venezuelan terrorist "Carlos" (Illich Ramirez Sanchez), responsible for kidnapping ministers of the Organization of Petroleum Export Countries in Vienna in December 1975, had received guerrilla training in Havana under DGI auspices. He also engaged in a terrorist raid in Venezuela.

- In Central America: As of 1979, terrorism in South America was on the wane because of harsh repression. But in Central America it was increasing. Besides the ruling Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Cuban intelligence has maintained supportive links with El Salvador's left-wing guerrillas of the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) and Armed Forces of National Resistance (FALN), as well as groups in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica.

- In the United States of the 1960s and early 1970s: Cuban intelligence support to the radical Weather Underground organization included guerrilla training for certain leaders, clandestine communications support via the Cuban Embassy in Canada, and the printing of propaganda materials in Cuba. DGI officials of the Cuban United Nations mission were also involved in funding black militant groups of the era.

Explosive material to be placed at the Statue of Liberty was supplied to the Revolutionary Action Movement, a black militant group, in 1965 by an employee of the Cuban Embassy in Canada.

- In the US of the '80s: DGI support to the violence-prone Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation has included training and operational assistance. Operations by "Los Macheteros," a Puerto Rican terrorist group, have included a \$7.2 million robbery in Connecticut and destruction of military aircraft in Puerto Rico.

- On narcotics: US government sources report a continuing Cuban intelligence role in facilitating narcotics trafficking in the Caribbean. Testimony in 1983 by the Assistant Secretary of State of inter-American Affairs alleges that "in exchange for Colombian drug runners smuggling arms to Cuban-backed insurgents (M-19),

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Cuba offered safe passage for ships carrying narcotics to the US through Cuban waters."

A key element in understanding Cuban intelligence, in particular the DGI, is the unusual degree of influence wielded by the Soviets. DGI defector Gerardo Peraza, testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1982, stated that Cuba's intelligence service was "under the direct orders of a Soviet general since 1970."

And as observed by noted British expert Brian Crozier: Since 1964, 60 Cubans a year have received 10 months' intelligence training near Moscow — half military and half DGI.

In summary, the more flamboyant manifestations of Cuban intelligence activities run in three categories:

- Policing of their own community and its exiles.
- Joint Cuban/Soviet anti-US intelligence operations.
- Support of various revolutionary groups which often utilize terrorist methods.

The first category is not dissimilar from those of other third-world countries, and results in activities similar to the event cited at the beginning of this article. The success met in the second category, although potentially damaging, is unknown. It is in the third category that the most notorious Cuban intelligence activity has occurred.

It is worth noting that Cuban support to revolution has not been particularly successful. Only in Angola and Nicaragua have Cuban-supported revolutionaries been victorious, and both are under counterattack at the moment. In 25 years of support to revolutionary groups, this record is not enviable.

The writer was a government official for two decades before becoming a consultant on international affairs.